

Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education

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Abstract

Students who are also parents (student-parents) are unique and often underrepresented in postsecondary settings. Balancing the responsibilities of home life alongside academic pursuits is often challenging for students in general and for some student-parents even more so. Faculty and students in a partnership project at a mid-size university in Alberta, Canada, took on a small study to examine student-parent experiences at their university. The partner team describes how a unique blend of student-faculty collaboration looked at supports, barriers, and higher education student norms relating to student-parent experiences. This study looked at the available literature as a foundation to identify the concerns facing students who are parents in higher education settings, as well as the policies and practices of postsecondary institutions that support student-parents. Survey and focus group methods aided in our understanding of the lived experiences of student-parents and their views of support within the university. Recommendations for institutional policy and practices for more supportive learning environments for student-parents include accessible childcare, information about campus resources, faculty awareness and compassion, and facilities on campus that can foster a sense of belonging.

Keywords

student-parents; higher education; postsecondary services; student success; student well-being; student life; parenting students; students with children; student affairs

Plain Language Summary

This inquiry describes a student-driven project based on their interest in exploring the data and potential gaps in the area of student-parents at their university. The research team intends to offer a uniquely Canadian perspective to the existing literature on the student-parent experience of university campus life. This study includes a scan of the available literature, a scan of local campus supports, and an exploration of local student-parent experiences from surveys and interviews. Finally, the team identifies observed gaps and provides recommendations for institutional policy and practice to best support student-parents' well-being in undergraduate university settings.

Introduction

This exploratory case study aimed to capture the experiences of student-parents enrolled in a small undergraduate university, as well as to identify the barriers and supports available at the institutional level and to examine possible practice changes to better support this particular community of students. In recent years, some community colleges have evolved into degree-granting institutions across Canada, drawing students into longer educational programs and aiding mature students living off campus to obtain degrees. At the same time, delayed parenting, changing family structures, and other social phenomena are features of students' lives that influence their postsecondary success (van Rhijn et al., 2011). Alongside these transitions, the supports and services offered to adult learners in community college settings, including family residences (Brown & Nichols, 2013), childcare (Adam, 2014), and on-campus support groups for parents (Moreau & Kerner, 2012), have gradually diminished.

Within this context of institutional and social change, as well as the shifting trends in academic programming and support, a partnership between faculty and students in a small Canadian undergraduate university sought to understand student-parent needs and circumstances at their university. Employing a partnership approach (Marquis, 2017), we undertook an exploratory study with students in a leadership course within a Bachelor of Child Studies degree program who applied to be student research assistants. Together, we explored how student-parents are supported in the academy and at our largely commuter (not residential) university campus.

The partnership between faculty and students developed uniquely. At the time of this study, the university had a Centre for Child Well-Being with faculty members and two student research assistants in paid positions. The Centre worked with practicum students in a third-year leadership practicum over two semesters to support leadership and research learning. Each semester, a different student interested in being involved in examining the experiences of student-parents on campus was involved in distinct phases of the project. The impetus for the study originated with a leadership practicum student who was also a student-parent. This student approached the Centre to explore the topic as a team to see if and how the Centre could serve as a point of entry to support student-parents. The study grew from this idea to examine the overall experience of student-parents at the undergraduate university campus.

Methods

An exploratory process was initiated and supported by more senior undergraduate research assistants, course faculty, and the Centre director, over four semesters between 2017 and 2019.

First, the students began reviewing the broader literature up to and including the year of analysis, 2019. This was followed by a scan of policies and practices for student-parents at our undergraduate university, and an exploration of the particular views and perspectives of student-parents at the university using online survey and focus group methods. Following the survey with focus group discussion enabled the research team to check back on results and hear from participants directly. Meeting in a focus group also enabled the team to appreciate the complex lives of student-parents and the challenges for student-parents to meet as a group on campus. The project closed with a formal report and recommendations based on the results of the research activities, and this case study report of our process and discoveries. A pragmatic lens (Morgan, 2014) and commitment to the student-faculty partnership approach (Marquis, 2017) were central to the goal of practical outcomes for both student-parents on campus and for teaching and learning outcomes for the student partners in the project. The consistent supervision and commitments also ensured rigorous research strategies and trustworthiness of the data and research outcomes.

Participant Characteristics

Participants included student-parents at the university. Within the sample ($n = 24$), the age range was 18–26 years (11 individuals), followed by 27–34 (8 individuals) and 35–42+ (5 individuals). Sixty-three percent of respondents were acting as co-parents; 8 participants were married, followed by single and common-law (5 participants in each category), separated (3 participants), widowed (2 participants), and divorced (1 participant). Of the participants who were married, 60% were between the ages of 35 and 42 years, and 45% of those who were common-law were between the ages of 18 and 26. Thirty-eight percent were acting as single parents. Sixty-seven percent of respondents had one child (16 participants), followed by 21% who had two (5 participants), 8% who had six or more children (2 participants), and 4% who had five children (1 participant).

Participants were recruited by using student social media and posters placed around campus. Student-parents were invited to email the project coordinator for information about the study, and the project coordinator provided interested participants with information about the study, a consent form, and online survey link. The survey development, survey implementation, and analysis were part of the supervised student research project undertaken over four semesters as part of a leadership practicum course in a child studies bachelor's degree. Framed by a pragmatic research paradigm (Morgan, 2014), the data collected in the survey addressed the awareness of existing services and the participants' perspectives and lived experiences. In a final phase of the study, following up from the survey data, student-parents from across campus were invited to a focus group interview to expand upon and check analysis from the surveys.

Research ethics certification was granted for the study by the university human subjects research ethics board. An online questionnaire survey format, using Google Forms, was employed to garner a range of respondents. The survey link was available for one semester (January to April). In addition, the invitation to participate was issued to the university community using social media links for students and student groups on campus and posters promoting participation displayed on university notice boards. All participants provided consent for using their data from the online survey, and the team completed an analysis of the data thematically.

Review of Existing Literature

We began the project with a review of the literature by practicum students, supported by the student research assistants and course faculty, to begin to understand policies and practices for student-parents at other institutions and the general scholarly knowledge on the subject. There was a dearth of peer-reviewed published information about student-parent experiences in Canada with some published studies, though few current papers, from the United States and the United Kingdom. The brief literature review was compiled as part of the students' assignment, with several themes noted from the literature, including accessible and affordable childcare (Adam, 2014; Baskerville, 2013; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Moreau & Kerner, 2012); institutional policies that address access to resources and facilities (Bostick et al., 2016; Field, 2017; Lucchini-Raies et al., 2018; Moreau, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2012); mental health and well-being (Lovell, 2014a; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019); the need for supportive staff and faculty (Attar Flores, 2013; Centre for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.; Institute for Women's Policy and Research, 2013; Lovell, 2014a; Lovell, 2014b; Lucchini-Raies et al., 2018); class scheduling (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Lucchini-Raies et al., 2018; Moreau, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2012); reasonable time and space for study, and gender issues (Brooks, 2013; Demeules & Hamer, 2013; Lucchini-Raies et al., 2018; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Nichols et al., 2017). We built upon these themes to establish key areas of exploration for our inquiry.

Institutional Scan

An environmental scan of support available to students at our undergraduate university revealed the availability of a few selected services that could support the needs and issues of student-parents, available for all students, not exclusively for student-parents. These services included counseling and wellness support, and a student association whose purpose is to enhance student experiences, liaise between students and the university, promote the welfare of students, and serve as a centre for activities on campus (SAMRU, 2018). Accessibility Services is responsible for creating a "more accessible, equitable and inclusive learning environment" (Mount Royal University, 2018, para. 4); Student Learning Services—which offers learning guidance, strategies, and peer supports—and a student-parent club run by and for student-parents are also potential supports for all students on campus.

Student Survey

Survey research was conducted to provide a greater baseline understanding of the student-parent perspective. Part one of the survey gathered demographic information: marital status (single, married, divorced, widowed, separated, and common-law), parenting status (single parent, co-parent), and the number of children. The second portion of the survey asked questions related to the services and resources on campus (those accessed by parents, those missing, and those offered but not accessed). The final portion focused on desired changes from the view of student-parents and the sense of community felt by these students. Parts two and three of the survey included open fields where respondents could elaborate and share their opinions. The online survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Results

The survey results are divided into sections that include a sense of belonging and community on campus; support, services, and resources on campus; and desired change. Aspects of the analysis are described in more detail to follow.

Sense of Community on Campus

Nearly all participants (96%) are full-time students; however, only 38% said they felt a sense of community at the university. There was no option for additional reflections in this section of the survey. However, we were interested in this specific question because the literature had alluded that students with a decreased sense of belonging on campus were less likely to use available resources and develop relationships with faculty. We followed up in the focus group discussion about this topic where students underscored that they did not know how to connect with other student-parents and did not have time or shared space to establish a community.

Support, Services, and Resources on Campus

This section of the survey focused on the services and resources on campus. There were no restrictions on what participants considered services or supports and no limit on how many answers could be listed. Based on the responses, there were four main areas participants indicated they did access: student association support (6 participants); counseling and wellness services (5); learning accessibility services (4); and a student-parents support group (3), which some participants indicated was good support. Many participants stated that they had accessed the university student association for specific help and some specified access to the student association's complimentary daily breakfast and the lending of funds. The university wellness centre and counseling services also appeared to be well-utilized by participants. Additionally, student learning accessibility services were accessed, but there was no elaboration explaining what this department could specifically offer student-parents.

In the second category, which sought to determine the supports student-parents were missing, most respondents indicated that child- and family-friendly spaces were missing from the campus environment (9 participants). The second most-commonly reported missing support was childcare (7 participants). Specifically, parents stated that short-term childcare, temporary childcare (1–3 hours on a pay-per-hour basis), and drop-in day care would be helpful. Parents also indicated that the campus lacked private spaces for breastfeeding (6 participants), with one participant explaining:

[I had an] arrangement with Security to use an empty office for pumping breast milk, [but] the arrangement took several months to sort out and [the office] was often locked when I needed access. So, a permanent room is needed.

A quarter of the participants (6 of the 24) indicated that compassion and particular support from faculty and staff would be helpful to their academic success. However, this was not always demonstrated; for example, one participant described a perceived lack of compassion, support, and even basic information, stating, “the university attitude seems to be ‘you want to be here, figure it out.’ Some professors are understanding and some less so.” This experience of varied responses

was echoed by several other participants, pointing to a degree of inconsistency between faculty, staff, and the student-parent population. Others stated that “leniency in attendance, and [the] opportunity to have kids attend [lectures] if needed” would help alleviate the stresses associated with being a student-parent.

The survey also sought to explore the students’ awareness of available supports and student access of those services on campus. Nearly half of the survey respondents indicated that childcare was offered at the university but not used (10 respondents). Of the subset who reported that childcare was inaccessible, over half (6 participants) explained that on-campus care costs were unaffordable. Two respondents said the age minimum for childcare was higher than what they needed. Other respondents indicated that the formal students’ association and clubs (3 participants) and campus health and wellness services (2 participants) were not used. One-third (8 participants) stated that they were unaware of what was available to them as student-parents.

Desired Changes

The final section of the survey asked participants about the changes they would like to see to better support their academic goals. The responses were grouped into one of five main categories: increased awareness of resources (6 participants), events for families (5 participants), childcare (4 participants), private spaces (3 participants), and a family room or clubhouse (3 participants). Childcare was indicated for three sub-reasons, including decreasing the minimum age limit, having drop-in hours, and decreasing the cost to make it more affordable for parents. An equal number of participants (3 each) indicated private spaces would be helpful for breastfeeding and pumping. A clubhouse or family room would work well as a study space for parents, where children could also be present.

In addition to increased knowledge of supports, some participants utilized some of them on-campus (mainly through their formal students’ association/union). However, an overwhelming majority were aware of on-site childcare but did not use it because of the high cost, a higher age minimum than what is deemed necessary (no children under 18 months), or because there is no option for drop-in care. Affordable, appropriate childcare is a service missing across many campuses (Attar Flores, 2013; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2013; Smit Quosai, 2010).

Participants also identified supports and resources or facilities they would find helpful as they pursue their academic goals. All respondents repeatedly indicated a high need for support due to their combined student and parenting roles. In addition to desiring increased communication of services and supports, the students’ needs included: private rooms for breastfeeding and pumping mothers, social family rooms where parents could take their children to play while working on their studies, and increased understanding from faculty and scheduling staff, which are needs that have been recognized as necessary in the literature (Estes, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019).

As an unintended result of this study, the parents who came together for the focus group interviews started a grassroots student-parent club. This club promoted and advocated for a parent-friendly room on campus to serve as a safe place for parents to feed their children or pump breast milk. The university administration supported the club by helping to find space in the library to allow for

such a safe facility. As a result, a new parent room was officially opened later that same year on the campus; the room enables student-parents to feed and change their babies, pump breast milk in a private space, or enjoy time in a common area with other parents (Rolfe, 2019).

Discussion

Based on the existing literature and the discoveries from our exploratory study, it appears that if student-parents had better support and more appropriate access to the supports offered, their sense of community might increase. A sense of belonging and the experience of community is indeed pivotal to both mental health and student success for students who are also parents (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019; Scharp et al., 2021). The university's student-parent population can more fully immerse in their university experience when feeling supported and understood, when they feel they belong and know they are part of a learning community.

Based on our exploration and reflection through this study, we recommend that faculty, staff, and administration of colleges and universities continue to invest in multiple levels of intervention and ongoing inquiry to address the needs identified. Significant improvements for student-parents in terms of resources such as affordable childcare are crucial starting places for enhanced support. Existing literature emphasizes the primary issue of affordable and accessible childcare (Attar Flores, 2013; Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013; Smit Quosai, 2010). Improving a sense of belonging and building community can only happen when fundamental concerns for childcare are addressed; while affordable childcare is part of new national investment initiatives, the urgency is felt by current university students who are parents.

As basic needs are met, there exist countless opportunities for essential inclusion and community building that can support student, parenting, and personal success in managing student-parents' multiple roles. Indeed, discoveries from research of student-parent experiences during COVID-19 in the United Kingdom revealed that awareness, shared community, and opportunities for inclusion were established in the creative responses for learners during the public health restrictions and lockdowns. These were viewed as opportunities for societal and institutional change that could enhance community building (Nikiforidou & Holmes, 2022).

Institutional policies can be part of addressing the communication, scheduling and facility, and resource access needs (Estes, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Awareness and physical facilities are also important factors for success, highlighting the need for university policy and reform. Colleges and universities might respond to this need by improving the communication of, and ease of access to, existing resources (for example, a specific student-parent tab on a university webpage or clear signage to family rooms or washrooms with changing tables). Colleges and universities can establish and promote spaces on campus where parents can breastfeed and pump breast milk in comfortable, private, and family-friendly rooms to have productive study time while their children play in family-friendly spaces. Teaching and learning practices that lend compassion and understanding to students are important considerations for faculty and staff development (Attar Flores, 2013; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Estes, 2011; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013; Moreau, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2012). These teaching-learning policy and practice recommendations, along with institutional factors such as childcare-friendly class scheduling, are further areas of development that can be recommended.

Recognizing the disconnect between student-parents and postsecondary policy, it is hoped this case study can influence the case for increased attention, policy, and programming for student-parents. Their experiences matter a great deal to the shape of postsecondary education and outcomes for current and future generations. Adequately reflecting the needs of student-parents in policy may decrease the exclusion experienced by student-parents and help students to belong to a fairer and more inclusive environment (Lucchini-Raies et al., 2018). We hope our exploratory review and case study results will contribute to further data collection and decision-making at colleges and universities.

Conclusion

This case study reviewed a student-faculty practicum project that explored the complexities of being a student-parent in a mid-size undergraduate Canadian University. The exploratory study looked at existing literature about student-parents in higher education, current resources available to student-parents at the university, and the experiences and views of student-parents. With little existing research in Canada on the topic, we found that more resources—specifically affordable childcare, options for class schedules, supportive faculty and staff, and opportunities for developing a student-parent community—were identified in both the wider literature and the student-parent participants’ experiences. Further investigation into the experiences of student-parents in Canada and beyond is warranted. This study was a small snapshot of one midsized Canadian postsecondary institution. The subject would benefit from an extended and expanded analysis of the needs and experiences of students who are also parents. Postsecondary institutions rely on student enrolment in a population that is influenced by changing economic and social dynamics. Students who are parents are navigating numerous roles as paid employees, students, parents, and numerous other relationships. It will be wise to examine how to best welcome and support these students in all their diverse needs. Informed by the flexibility and opportunities from COVID-19 pandemic teaching-learning experiences, we cannot unsee the possibilities for positive change that can better support student-parents and all people.

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Notes

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